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By Daniel Thigpen

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Stockton man grows, buys backyard produce for resale

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Eric Firpo is harvesting Stockton's vast supply of backyard produce and selling it back to hungry residents.

The 47-year-old Tracy Press editor figured he could make some extra cash while promoting natural, healthy eating. And by taking advantage of Stockton's urban bounty of fruit trees and home gardens, he's capitalizing on a growing desire to eat locally grown foods.



PHOTO/ CLIFFORD OTO/THE RECORD

Eric Firpo stands next to a tangerine tree in the backyard of his Stockton home.

"I got to thinking, there are fruit trees all over the city," Firpo said from his central Stockton home, where he's torn out the grass next to his sidewalk and planted Swiss chard in its place, and where two dozen young trees - avocado, plum, nectarine, cherry - grow in the yard.

His aim is to save, and sell, produce that otherwise would fall to the ground and rot. "There's thousands of pounds of fruit that literally go to waste," he said.

Firpo began his fledgling business, called Stockton Harvest, in December, passing out fliers throughout town. It works like this: Firpo will purchase produce from local residents for as much as 15 cents a pound, then sell it to neighbors for \$1 a pound.

Although he said he hasn't earned many repeats yet, Firpo said he's slowly gaining customers.

Pam Mallett-Jones quickly warmed to Firpo's neighborhood-focused concept when she received a flier at her house months ago. She promptly purchased a few pounds of walnuts, persimmons and pomegranates.

The 59-year-old retired teacher and vegetarian is a farmers market regular, and she said she was pleasantly surprised by the quality of Firpo's haul. Plus, she's enthusiastic about the Stockton Harvest philosophy.

"He's found a need, and he's filling it," Mallett-Jones said. "Everybody's got stuff all over the ground. I would certainly rather get some fruit that was grown locally than go to the grocery store and get something that was grown in Chile."

So far, Firpo counts one restaurant as a customer: Earlier this month, David Qualls, the owner of the Blackwater Cafe Downtown, bought 20 pounds of oranges to use for juice.

He said he appreciates the simplicity of Firpo's business model. "The fact that he's using people's waste, the whole reuse, recycle, that aspect of it," Qualls said. "You can't beat fresh-picked fruit. You just can't beat it."

Firpo's unique experiment is an extension of his evolving attitudes toward food and farming.

He loathes pesticides and won't use them, although he can't guarantee the people he buys from don't. He has a compost pile and uses rain barrels to catch water for summer gardening. He's reading books by the noted contemporary natural and local food advocate Michael Pollan.

While he is a certified master gardener, Firpo has no farming experience, so he admits this will be a learning experience in the months and, he hopes, years to come.

He's caught the attention of a new nonprofit with similar, albeit less entrepreneurial, goals.

Jeremy Terhune and others are looking for 5 acres to establish a community-supported garden that could serve dozens of poor families.

He said Stockton Harvest has the potential to be an important partner.

"We want to increase access to healthy food and active living in the community," Terhune said. "There's a real bridge between what we want to do."

Ultimately, Firpo says he'd like to find some land, grow fruit trees and row crops and set up a stand to sell produce on-site all year.

"It would be like a farmers market," he said, "but you could go there every day."

For now, he'll just stick to his yard and yours.

Contact reporter Daniel Thigpen at (209) 546-8254 or dthigpen@recordnet.com.

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What: Stockton resident Eric Firpo is buying the city's backyard produce and selling it back to residents in his neighborhood near University of the Pacific. Buying rates: 15 cents a pound for fruit. Selling prices: \$1 a pound for fruit (minimum three-pound orders); walnuts are \$4 per pound shelled. More info: www.stocktonharvest.com or twitter.com/StocktonHarvest

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